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# Asians Doubt That U.S. Can Halt Heroin Flow

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Formidable obstacles confront the United States in its efforts to halt the flow of heroin to its troops in Vietnam and to prevent Southeast Asian heroin from moving into the American market to fill the gap that may be left if the traffic from the Middle East is contained.

American officials, aware of the high priority President Nixon attaches to the program, display determined hopefulness that the flow can be significantly reduced, at least while American troops remain in south Vietnam.

Asian officials, on the other hand, are openly doubtful of the chances of even limited success over a short term. They express growing concern that a problem that they had considered primarily American may also be on the rise among their own people. They see the search for a solution--if indeed one can be found--as a process that will take years.

The Asians agree with American officials that with increased United States assistance they can intercept a greater share of the traffic in opium and its derivatives from the contiguous growing areas in the mountains of northeastern Burma, northern Thailand and northwestern Laos. But they believe that both supply and demand are so great and the profits so temptingly high that the supply and the demand will remain more or less in balance until one or the other can be controlled.

In a month of inquiry in Thailand and Laos it was possible to get a reasonably full picture of how the sap of the seeded pod of Papaver somniferum, the opium poppy, moves from the mountain tribesmen who cultivate and harvest it, is converted into heroin and reaches the consumer. Much vagueness was encountered, based both on secretiveness and on a lack of knowledge.

Among American officials, whose information-gathering capacity in Laos and Thailand is believed to surpass that of the national Governments by far, there was reluctance to discuss pertinent information that contrasts with the declared view of officials in Washington that exposure of the problem is in the national interest.

The principal factors behind Asian skepticism over the outlook for short-term success are these:

¶The main growing area--the Shan State in Burma--is in open rebellion against the Government in Rangoon, which exercises little control in the remote and inaccessible region.

¶The growing areas in Thailand and Laos are contested by rebel and bandit groups that make Government action extremely difficult.

¶The borders between the three countries run through densely jungled mountains and effective control is not exercised except at certain crossing points.

¶Opium is in most cases the growers' only cash crop and no substitutes with comparable return are available.

¶The trading networks are so firmly established and their links with Government and military officials who provide protection and tolerance so close that the Burmese Government is believed to be resigned to its inability to act and the Thai and Laotian Governments at a loss on how to carry out their new-found desire to act.

¶Habit of Unpopular Minorities

The historical view of opium and its use among Southeast Asian officials has been that it provides profits for them from an admittedly bad habit that has been largely limited to unpopular minorities: the overseas Chinese, mainly coolies, and mountain tribesmen. Both groups sought refuge from poverty and hard labor and the absence of other medicines to make them forget pain and illness.

About three-fourths of the production is consumed in Southeast Asia, in the growing regions and in cities of heavy addiction such as Hong Kong and Bangkok. But now, by bringing an eager sector of the population into Southeast Asia in the form

of the American soldier in Vietnam, the trade picture is being distorted.

"Over the last year," a knowledgeable intelligence official in Washington said, "the production of heroin in Southeast Asia has risen out of sight."

White heroin, refined to a purity of about 95 per cent, is the most luxurious opium product and the only one with appeal to American consumers, at home and abroad. Asian opium or heroin users are content, at the most expensive, with cheaper purple heroin suitable only for smoking, not injection.

More White Heroin Produced

Only since the discovery of the American market in Vietnam have Asian traders and processors begun to produce significant quantities of white heroin.

Since the estimated profit on a kilogram (2.2 pounds) of heroin between the grower of the required poppies and the user is put at more than \$200,000, people in the early stages in the complicated distribution network are increasingly finding their best interest in refining the opium to the most profitable state themselves.

The result has been a growth of refineries close to where the poppies bloom. The Central Intelligence Agency has identified seven installations capable of producing white heroin in the Burmese-Laotian border region where none had been known a year ago.

With the United States urging the cooperation of the opium-producing countries to suppress the trade, Asian officials believe that increasingly more refining will be done in the inaccessible border region to reduce the bulk and detectability of the product to be taken to market.

In the green mountains on whose slopes and valleys the poppies grow, the Government's writs, in so far as they run at all, run as far as do the roads--of which there are scarcely any.

Except for Poppies, Self-Sufficient

The growers--be they Meo, Yao, Lisu, Lahu, Akha, Kachin, Karen or any of the other mountain peoples--live in small villages largely apart from the lowland civilizations of the countries to which they belong. They eat the rice and vegetables they grow, make most of their own cloth and depend on the poppies they raise for most of their cash income.

Their principal contact with the world, apart from the occasional patrols of Government or anti-Government soldiers, are Chinese traders, who sell them arms, ammunition, patent medicines, tools and other utensils. Early in the year the traders come to buy the opium that has just been harvested.

Many of the traders, according to the best available accounts, are small operators. After this stage in the chain of distribution there is little room for anything but potent organizations. The most potent are the groups that have their origin in remnants of Chinese Nationalist armies that sought refuge just across China's border with Burma after the Communist victory in 1949.

According to the C.I.A., the two groups, operating from base camps in Thailand, dominate more than 80 per cent of the traffic from the Shan State as a result of their control of a strip roughly 75 miles long in the extreme north of Thailand along the Burmese border.

The group that derives from the Chinese Nationalist Fifth Army, the larger of the two forces, is commanded by Tuan Shi-wen. He has about 1,800 men, informed Western sources say, only about a tenth of them trained soldiers and the rest hill tribesmen hired as smugglers.

Links to Irregular Bands

The sources reported that General Tuan, from his headquarters at Mae Salong commands 11 operating units in the Shan State that, in turn, command a number of friendly irregular bands in Burma with which the general has concluded alliances.

The second group, from the former Third Army, is commanded by Li Wen-Huan, who was reported to have about 1,400 men, also consisting largely of hired tribesmen. Their headquarters is at Tam Ngop, with seven operating units in Burma up to the Chinese border.

A third Chinese group, known as the First Independent Unit, received financial support from Taiwan through the Chinese Nationalist Embassy here longer than the others and, according to informed sources, may still be doing so. The sources said that the unit also received arms and ammunition smuggled from Ban Houei Sai, Laos, to its camp near Pang, in Thailand.

Commanded by Ma Ching-ko, the unit has a well-trained force of about 400. The sources said the unit ran intelligence

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